



Early Mesoamerican Civilizations

MAIN IDEA

CULTURAL INTERACTION The Olmec created the Americas' first civilization, which in turn influenced later civilizations.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Later American civilizations relied on the technology and achievements of earlier cultures to make advances.

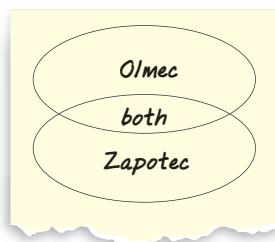
TERMS & NAMES

- Mesoamerica
- Olmec
- Zapotec
- Monte Albán

SETTING THE STAGE The story of developed civilizations in the Americas begins in a region called **Mesoamerica**. (See map on opposite page.) This area stretches south from central Mexico to northern Honduras. It was here, more than 3,000 years ago, that the first complex societies in the Americas arose.

TAKING NOTES

Comparing Use a Venn diagram to compare Olmec and Zapotec cultures.



The Olmec

Mesoamerica's first known civilization builders were a people known as the **Olmec**. They began carving out a society around 1200 B.C. in the jungles of southern Mexico. The Olmec influenced neighboring groups, as well as the later civilizations of the region. They often are called Mesoamerica's "mother culture."

The Rise of Olmec Civilization Around 1860, a worker clearing a field in the hot coastal plain of southeastern Mexico uncovered an extraordinary stone sculpture. It stood five feet tall and weighed an estimated eight tons. The sculpture was of an enormous head, wearing a headpiece. (See *History Through Art*, pages 244–245.) The head was carved in a strikingly realistic style, with thick lips, a flat nose, and large oval eyes. Archaeologists had never seen anything like it in the Americas.

This head, along with others that were discovered later, was a remnant of the Olmec civilization. The Olmec emerged about 1200 B.C. and thrived from approximately 800–400 B.C. They lived along the Gulf Coast of Mexico, in the modern-day Mexican states of Veracruz and Tabasco.

Gulf Coast Geography On the surface, the Gulf Coast seemed an unlikely site for a high culture to take root. The region was hot and humid and covered with swamps and jungle. In some places, giant trees formed a thick cover that prevented most sunlight from reaching the ground. Up to 100 inches of rain fell every year. The rainfall swelled rivers and caused severe flooding.

However, the region also had certain advantages. There were abundant deposits of salt and tar, as well as fine clay used in making pottery. There was also wood and rubber from the rain forest. The hills to the north provided hard stone from which the Olmec could make tools and monuments. The rivers that laced the region provided a means of transport. Most important, the flood plains of these rivers provided fertile land for farming.

MAIN IDEA**Making Inferences**

A In what ways did the Olmec's environment help in the creation of its civilization?

The Olmec used their resources to build thriving communities. The oldest site, San Lorenzo, dates back to around 1150 B.C. Here archaeologists uncovered important clues that offered a glimpse into the Olmec world. **A**

Olmec Society At San Lorenzo archaeologists discovered earthen mounds, courtyards, and pyramids. Set among these earthworks were large stone monuments. They included columns, altars, and more colossal, sculpted heads, which may have represented particular Olmec rulers. These giant monuments weigh as much as 44 tons. Some scholars think that Olmec workers may have moved these sculptures over land on rolling logs to the river banks. From there, they may have rafted the monuments along waterways to various sites.

To the east of San Lorenzo, another significant Olmec site, La Venta, rose around 900 B.C. Here, researchers discovered a 100-foot-high mound of earth and clay. This structure may have served as the tomb of a great Olmec ruler. Known as the Great Pyramid, the mound also may have been the center of the Olmec religion. Experts believe the Olmec prayed to a variety of nature gods.

Most of all, they probably worshiped the jaguar spirit. Numerous Olmec sculptures and carvings depict a half-human, half-jaguar creature. Some scholars believe that the jaguar represented a powerful rain god. Others contend that there were several jaguar gods, representing the earth, fertility, and maize.

Trade and Commerce Archaeologists once believed that sites such as La Venta were ceremonial centers where important rituals were performed but few people lived. In recent years, however, experts have begun to revise that view. The Olmec appear to have been a prosperous people who directed a large trading network throughout Mesoamerica. Olmec goods traveled as far as Mexico City to the north and Honduras to the south. In addition, raw materials—including iron ore and various stones—reached San Lorenzo from faraway regions. This trade network helped boost the Olmec economy and spread Olmec influence.

Decline of the Olmec For reasons that are not fully understood, Olmec civilization eventually collapsed. Scholars believe San Lorenzo was destroyed around 900 B.C. La Venta may have fallen sometime around 400 B.C. Some experts speculate that outside invaders caused the destruction. Others believe the Olmec may have destroyed their own monuments upon the death of their rulers. **B**

MAIN IDEA**Hypothesizing**

B What might lead to the disappearance of an entire civilization?



Zapotec Civilization Arises

By the time Olmec civilization had collapsed, another people—the **Zapotec**—were developing an advanced society to the southwest, in what is now the Mexican state of Oaxaca (wuh•HAH•kah). Though they showed traces of Olmec influence, the Zapotec built a unique civilization.

Peoples of the Oaxaca Valley Oaxaca is a rugged region of mountains and valleys in southern Mexico. In the center of the state, three valleys meet to form a large open area known as the Oaxaca Valley. This valley has fertile soil, a mild climate, and enough rainfall to support agriculture. As a result, various peoples have made the Oaxaca Valley their home, including the ancient Zapotec.

For centuries the Zapotec lived in scattered villages throughout the valley. By 1000 B.C., however, one site—San José Mogote—was emerging as the main power in the region. At this site, the Zapotec constructed stone platforms. They also built temples and began work on monumental sculptures. By 500 B.C. they had developed early forms of writing and a calendar system.

The Zapotec Flourish at Monte Albán Around 500 B.C., Zapotec civilization took a major leap forward. High atop a mountain at the center of the Oaxaca Valley, the Zapotec built the first real urban center in the Americas, **Monte Albán**. This city, with its commanding view of the entire valley, grew and prospered over the next several centuries. By 200 B.C., Monte Albán was home to around 15,000 people. The city eventually would reach a peak population of almost 25,000. **C**

From A.D. 250 to A.D. 700, Monte Albán was truly impressive. At the heart of the city was a giant plaza paved with stones. Towering pyramids, temples, and

MAIN IDEA

Comparing

C How does Monte Albán's population compare to the populations of today's major cities?

Global Patterns

Pyramids

A number of ancient peoples used pyramids for temples, tombs, and observatories. The Egyptians built pyramids as tombs. Their pyramids had smooth sides and came to a point. In contrast, the pyramids built by the Zapotec at Monte Albán (shown below) have stepped sides, with flat tops that served as platforms for temples.

INTEGRATED TECHNOLOGY

INTERNET ACTIVITY Make a poster about the different kinds of pyramids in Egypt and Mesoamerica. Go to **classzone.com** for your research.



palaces, all made out of stone, surrounded this plaza. There was even an observatory for observing the stars to establish a calendar. Nearby was a series of stone carvings of corpses. Their facial features show an Olmec influence.

For more than a thousand years the Zapotec controlled the Oaxaca Valley and the surrounding region. Sometime after A.D. 600, the Zapotec began to decline. Some scholars believe they may have suffered a loss of trade or other economic difficulties. As with the Olmec, the fall of Zapotec civilization remains a puzzle.

The Early Mesoamericans' Legacy

Although both the Zapotec and Olmec civilizations eventually collapsed, each culture influenced the Mesoamerican civilizations that followed.

The Olmec Leave Their Mark The Olmec contributed much to later Mesoamerican civilizations. They influenced the powerful Maya, who will be discussed in Chapter 16. Olmec art styles, especially the use of the jaguar motif, can be seen in the pottery and sculpture of later peoples in the region. In addition, future Mesoamerican societies copied the Olmec pattern of urban design.

The Olmec also left behind the notions of planned ceremonial centers, ritual ball games, and an elite ruling class. And while there is no clear evidence that the Olmec used a written language, their descendants or a related people carved out stone symbols that may have influenced later glyph writing. **D**

Zapotec Contributions The Zapotec left behind their own legacy. It included a hieroglyphic writing system and a calendar system based on the movement of the sun. In addition, the Zapotec are noted as the Americas' first city builders. Monte Albán combined ceremonial grandeur with residential living space. This style influenced the development of future urban centers and became a hallmark of Mesoamerican civilizations.

As the Zapotec and Olmec flourished and then declined, civilizations were also taking shape in South America. Along the rough and mountainous terrain in what is now Peru, ancient peoples came together. There, they created more advanced and complex societies.

MAIN IDEA

Forming Opinions

D What do you consider to be the Olmec's most important contributions to later cultures?

SECTION

2

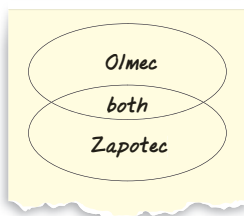
ASSESSMENT

TERMS & NAMES 1. For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Mesoamerica
- Olmec
- Zapotec
- Monte Albán

USING YOUR NOTES

2. What was one characteristic unique to Olmec culture?



MAIN IDEAS

3. Why did Olmec civilization collapse?
4. What was the role of trade in Olmec civilization?
5. What were some important Zapotec contributions to later cultures?

CRITICAL THINKING & WRITING

6. **DRAWING CONCLUSIONS** Why do you think the Olmec are called Mesoamerica's "mother culture"?
7. **ANALYZING CAUSES** What factors made the Oaxaca Valley a likely place for civilization to develop?
8. **COMPARING** What were some similarities between the Olmec and Zapotec cultures?
9. **WRITING ACTIVITY** **CULTURAL INTERACTION** As a trader from a small Mesoamerican village, you have just returned from your first visit to the Olmec site at La Venta. Write a **description** of what you might tell your family about the things you saw at the site.

CONNECT TO TODAY DRAWING A MASK

What are some events or holidays in North America where participants wear masks? Draw a picture of a jaguar **mask** that you would like to wear for such a festival.